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Embracing the (un)Desired: Disability, Environment, and Citizenship in Laura Aguilar's Photographs

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Embracing the (un) Desired: Disability, Environment, and Citizenship in Laura Aguilar's Photographs

by

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Dedication

To the desert and my crip family

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Abstract

Embracing the un (Desired): Disability, Environment, and Citizenship in Laura Aguilar's Photographs

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This thesis focuses on Chicana photographer Laura Aguilar and the role disability had on her artistic practice. My analysis of Aguilar's work focuses on several images from Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait* (1996-2007) and *Grounded* (1996-2007) series, and three photographs titled *Three Eagles Flying* (1993), *Access + Opportunity= Success* (1993), and *Will Work For #4* (1993). I approach these images through a disability studies framework of the body-mind to emphasize the influence of Aguilar's non-normative identity on her photography. Throughout my analysis, I find that her devalued position as a disabled, poor, queer Chicana is a source of knowledge for her visualizations of exclusion and discrimination of minorities. I expand on conversations surrounding her nude self-portraits in nature by discussing the ontological relationship between Aguilar and the American Southwest deserts and the care work she established. My thesis is based on disability and is structured by the diverse manifestations of Aguilar's exploration of her non-normative body-mind.

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Introduction: Care work and Resistance

In Laura Aguilar's black and white photograph *Grounded #106* (fig.1), a torso-like ridge at the foreground of the image traces the rough texture of a boulder situated in the desert. As your eye follows the twisting fault line, it lands on Aguilar's smooth, curving back at the center of the photograph. Because Aguilar positions her body to mimic the boulder above, at first glance she is indecipherable from the rocky landscape. Slowly, the shadows on Aguilar's back and the folds of her skin distinguish themselves from the dark ridges of the towering boulders and reveal themselves to you. Rather than manipulating the landscape, Aguilar takes on the responsibility of adjusting her body to the surrounding desert. Aguilar creates a relationship with the landscape that does not reduce itself to a non-human-human binary. The connections she draws between the shadowy desert bodies and her own creates an indistinguishable relation. By morphing herself with the landscape, Aguilar depicts the caring relationship between her and the desert.

Throughout her life, Chicana lesbian artist Laura Aguilar turned to photography in order to explore the most vulnerable aspects of herself like, her struggles with her mental health, body image, identity, and the things she felt most deeply. In her photographs, Aguilar makes hypervisible her body and those of her queer community as a way of resisting the invisibility of nonnormative gender, sexuality, ability, fatness, and race. Born in 1958 in San Gabriel, California to a Mexican American father and Irish American mother, Aguilar spent her early years stifled by her protective family,

disregarded by teachers, and bullied for her large frame and undiagnosed auditory processing disorder. When she was introduced to photography, Aguilar discovered a visual language that would allow her to translate her experience as a poor, queer, disabled Chicana into images that explored the relationship between herself, the environment, and institutions that excluded her voice. Aguilar is well-known for her nude self-portraits taken in the deserts of Texas, New Mexico, and Southern California and intimate portraits of her queer Chicanx community in Los Angeles. As a woman grappling with issues involving the body, identity, landscape, mental health, and disability Aguilar sought the grounding effects of the natural landscape stating:

> Every time the depression comes up, I can look at the artwork and say, 'you feel content here, you feel comfortable there. 'I'm trying to convince myself I'm not what I always thought of myself: I'm ugly, I'm not worth living […] I am these things, too: I am a kind person, a funny person, a compassionate person. In these photographs I'm beautiful. I'm kind to myself.[1]

My analysis of Aguilar's work will focus on several images from her continual photographic series *Nature Self Portrait* and *Grounded* and three photographs titled *Three Eagles Flying* (fig.7), *Access + Opportunity = Success* (fig.8), and *Will Work For #4* (fig.9). For my thesis, I consider the role Aguilar's disabilities had on her developing artistic practice and how she explored her disabled identity in her work to resist the invisibility of non-normative body-minds. When referring to body-mind, I am talking about what disability scholar Eli Clare describes as the inextricable link between one's body and mind while de-emphasizing the ideology of cure that supports the idea that they

[1] Michael Stone, *Laura Aguilar Life. The Body, Her Perspective,* produced by Michael Stone (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2008) Film.

are separated, and the mind is superior to the body. According to Clare, the ideology of cure is rooted in the medical-industrial complex where "All of our body-minds are judged in one way or another, found to be normal or abnormal, valuable or disposable, healthy or unhealthy."[2] The concept of cure also exists beyond what is considered medical to anything deemed "troubled" in need of repair.[3]Throughout my analysis of Aguilar's photographs, I find that her work was influenced by her experience with auditory processing disorder, depression, and her fat body.

Growing up, Aguilar's self-esteem was impacted by the difficulties she faced because of her non-normative body-mind. Oftentimes, her auditory processing disorder left her ignored by family, friends, and teachers because it made it challenging for her to read, write, and follow conversations due to cognitive difficulties in processing sounds. Early in her life, Aguilar was exposed to photography by her older brother and found a creative medium that she could use to express her inner and outer realities. Rather than thinking of photography as an assistive tool for Aguilar to communicate with, it is more fitting to think of it as an interpreter of Aguilar's artistic language. Like disabled performance artist Alice Sheppard notes in her own work, disability and their technologies can be reimagined as interpreters of disability aesthetics.[4] In Aguilar's case, photography captured the artistic and resistive non-verbal relationship she had towards

[2] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 69.
[3] Ibid, 77.
[4] Alice Sheppards, " Staging Bodies, Performing Ramps: Cultural- Aesthetic Disability Technoscience," *Catalyst Journal*, April 1, 2019.

herself, the environment, and the marginalization of minorities, and non-normative people.

In my analysis of "devalued" body-minds, I consider Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portraits* and *Grounded* series and her positioning of her queer disabled, brown body-mind as part of the landscape. The ontological relationship Aguilar has with the desert landscapes she photographs in is one of care and continuity. When Aguilar photographed herself in relation to the Southwestern deserts, located in the Gila Desert National Forest, El Malpais National Monument, and Joshua Tree National Park, she was able to find acceptance and love for herself despite mainstream and medical pressures to change. Rather than manipulating the landscape to fit her image, she shaped herself to be part of the boulders and rocky creeks. Through the formal aspects of her work, I find Aguilar's careful consideration of the desert and the care she affords herself a form of resistance to the ideology of cure.

By choosing to analyze her nature self-portraits, many of them set in Southwestern landscapes, I argue that Aguilar is drawing parallels between her embodiment and the destruction and disabling of the Southwest land and bodies by settler colonialism. As a queer Chicana, Aguilar's work recalls Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* and what they describe as a theory in the flesh "…where the physical realities of our lives-our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings- all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity."[5]

[5] Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 19.

The Chicanx themes relating to geography, political, gender, and social identity are communicated in Aguilar's affective photographic language. Her incorporation of the body in the images I consider also brings to mind Anzaldúa's *Light in The Dark/ Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* where Anzaldúa writes:

> Our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering and overlapping "countries." We're each composed of information, billions of bits of cultural knowledge superimposing many different categories of experience. Like a map with colored web lines of rivers, highways, lakes, towns, and other landscape featured *en donde pasan y cruzan las cosas*, we are "marked."[6]

In the *Nature Self-Portraits* and *Grounded* series images as well as *Three Eagles Flying*, *Access + Opportunity = Success*, and *Will Work For #4* I study, Aguilar combines similar Chicanx ideas with her personal experiences as a disabled, poor, queer Chicana into the photographs to demonstrate in non-didactic and didactic methods how resistant she is to the injustices she faced because of her identity.

The first images that I will be analyzing are six photographs that belong to Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portraits* and *Grounded* series. I chose this set of images because they portray Chicanx themes of ancestral roots, colonization, assimilation and the body, as well as a disability identity through affective visual methods that act as a form of visual activism. By affective visual methods, I mean how Aguilar's images are able to transmit the affects of her social reality to viewers. Teresa Brennan's work on affect theory and her use of the term "transmission of affect," is helpful here. Brennan's defines the term as "…simply that the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or

[6] Gloria E, Anzaldúa. *Light in The Dark/ Luz en Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Edited by Analouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 69.

depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another."[7] Through an understanding of images as carriers of affect, Aguilar's work functions as a powerful form of activism because of its ability to move people in a physiological manner.

The activism that we find in Aguilar's photographs incorporates issues of the environment and non-normative body-minds. Historically, deserts have been racialized as "othered" landscapes and seen as wastelands by Euromericans. In settler colonialisms efforts to manipulate the natural environment, the desert was modified to serve the agricultural efforts of the Imperial settlers and indigenous folk were forcefully removed or killed by colonists. According to disability studies scholar Traci Brynne Voyles, the desert is a savage and unproductive place in the American environmental imagination because of its inability to uphold the Western, settler colonial notion that human and non-human bodies must be able, productive, and normative to be worthy. In her search to find comfort, Aguilar sought out the warmth and companionship of the natural landscape stating in *Laura Aguilar: Life, the Body, Her Perspective* that she rarely received physical touch and found it satisfying to press her skin on the rocky surfaces of the desert and feel the wind caress her body.[8] Unlike settler colonialism's modifications she does not attempt to continue the disabling effects of modification to the desert environment in which she photographed in but takes on the responsibility of caring for an environment that has been rendered a "wasteland."

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[7] Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 3.
[8] Stone, *Laura Aguilar Life. The Body, Her Perspective,* 2008.

Previous scholarship on Aguilar mainly describes her work as a resistance to cultural beauty standards.In my thesis, I argue that Aguilar places her naked body among nature to find contentment and meaning in her fat body and care for her body-mind, which was harmed by our fatphobic and ableist culture. In my analysis I will be looking at disability scholars Eli Clare, Alison Kafer, Traci Brynne Voyle, and Susan Wendell. As well as fat activist Caleb Luna who proclaims that we live in a time where fatness is viewed as an aberration and should be eradicated for public health and safety.[9] This eradication of non-normative body-minds calls to mind disability studies critique of the ideology of cure that operates on socially created definitions of natural and normal. My analysis of Aguilar's portrayal of joy and care towards her body-mind and nature complicates previous scholarship on Aguilar's self-portraiture by considering her practice a form of care that resists cure.

How Aguilar morphs her body to the landscape and mimics the lines, textures, and crevices of the rocky Southwestern deserts is also a commentary on colonized landscapes and ancestral roots. By mimicking the landscape, Aguilar identifies with her ancestors who were in the Southwest for generations. According to Sybil Venegas, Aguilar's mother, Juanita Grisham, was a fifth generation Mexican Californian native, and her maternal lineage is rooted in was is known as the Old Mission.[10] This community stemmed from several ranchos of the former San Gabriel Mission. The identity Aguilar is

[9] Caleb Luna, "The Natural History of the World," *canadianart*, February 27, 2019.
[10] Rebecca Epstein and Sybil Venegas, eds., *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press: Vincent Price Art Museum, East Los Angeles College, 2017), 10.

depicting through her interaction with the land is tied to her Mexican American heritage. Aguilar's decision to mimic the landscape is complicated through her homage to her ancestors and the camouflaging of colonized subjects and environments. By mimicking the colonized landscape, Aguilar's work alludes to post-colonial conversations on mimicry, such as Homi Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" where he writes, "… mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge […] colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite […] the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence."[11] However, like Homi Bhabha goes on further to explain mimicry can be a subversive tool for the colonized subject stating "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."[12]Aguilar's play with mimicry in her nude self-portraits series brings to mind settler colonialists destructive practices of modifying the Southwest to fit the ideals of Euromericans. By mimicking the contours and textures of the colonized landscape, Aguilar forces us to think about who has the authority to modify what was there before settlers invaded the American Southwest. Due to colonialist's legacies in our Euromerican society, this same mimicry also demonstrates the assimilation of colonized bodies.

[11] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," in *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 122.
[12] Ibid, 126.

In addition to my analysis of Aguilar's images, I draw from scholar Julie Avril Minich's inquiry of bodily metaphors used in defining political belonging. In my reading of *Three Eagles Flying* I argue that Aguilar is physically engaging with political symbols by employing the U.S. and Mexican flag, and referring to her bounded and anonymous figures as another eagle to depict political subjects referred to what Mae Ngai calls *alien citizens*: persons who are "… citizens by virtue of their birth… but who are presumed to be foreign."[13] Through *Three Eagles Flying*, Aguilar resists the exclusion of the citizen or immigrant that does not fall into the national image of a whole, nondisabled, healthy, person that is not a racial or sexual minority. In this photograph, Aguilar embraces her non-confirmative Chicanx identity and ambivalent body. Through this haunting self-representation, she captures what Anzaldúa writes as the Chicanx practice of:

> Constant trafficking, negotiating, and dialoguing across borders results in a profound new mestizaje, one that transgresses the biological and encompasses cultural mixtures. This new mestizaje eschews the racial hierarchies inherent in older mestizaje. We do not allow ourselves to shelter in simplistic colonialist notions of racial difference, exclusionary boundaries, and binaries (such as other insider). We must unchain identity from meanings that can no longer contain it; we must move beyond externalized forms of social identity and location such as family, race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, nationality.[14]

I examine Aguilar's politically charged photograph *Three Eagles Flying* to discuss the body politics of exclusionary nationalism that I argue is present in her work. When I refer to exclusionary nationalism, I mean the construction of political communities through decisions about who will and who will not be in them.[15] In *Three Eagles Flying,*

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[13] Julie Avril Minich, *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 3.
[14] Anzaldúa, *Light in The Dark,* 73.
[15] Minich, *Accessible Citizenships*, 3.

Aguilar's fat, queer, and brown body, situated between the U.S. and Mexican flag, creates a haunting visualization of the silencing, exclusion, and violence perpetuated onto "undesired" body-minds by nation building processes and patriotism.

Expanding on my analysis of Aguilar's self-portraits and activist work, I consider her images titled *Access + Opportunity= Success Will Work for #4*. Through these photographs, Aguilar is challenging the elitism and ableism of academic and art institutions and their exclusion of minorities. Due to her socio-economic reality, Aguilar did not have access to educational systems that recognized and addressed learning disabilities which resulted in her graduating high school unable to read and feeling powerless. By focusing on these images, I hope to address Aguilar's critique of the social and cultural structures that enforce the exclusion of marginalized persons. In my efforts to understand discrimination towards disability I look at writings by Eli Clare where he asserts that "…in today's world, being seen as intellectually, cognitively, or developmentally disabled is a dangerous because intelligence and verbal communication are entrenched markers of personhood."[16] Through this defining cultural attitude towards intelligence and her re-telling of her adolescence, we know that Aguilar's experience with auditory processing disorder and the difficulties she faced in the education system left her rooted in isolation. Without personhood, one faces neglect and justifiable abuse in and these images Aguilar is making known how value is distributed in our society and how she falls out of these boundaries. By paying attention to Aguilar's experience of

[16] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection,* 157.

marginalization due to her disability and fat identity I hope to bring a more nuanced perspective to the connection between her body-mind and practice of self-acceptance that fueled her resistance to injustice.

On the whole, the disability studies concept of the body-mind drives my analysis of Aguilar's work because it takes into account the interconnection between body and mind. By rejecting the Western dualistic understanding of the body and the superiority of the mind, I hope to bring attention to how both inform each other. This interrelation between the body and mind is important to consider in Aguilar's work because her practice was informed by her experiences with her fat body, auditory processing disorder, and mental health. Through the concept of the body-mind, I try to understand her racialized, queer, and socio-economic identity through a framework that considers disability. For my thesis, I celebrate Aguilar's work and how it is dismantling oppressive attitudes and shedding light on the value of all body-minds.

Chapter 1: Body-minds, Deserts, and Mimicry

In *Nature Self-Portrait #9* (fig.5), we find Laura Aguilar draped over the rocky edge of small creek in the arid and mountainous Southwestern landscape. The intimate watery enclave she presses her large body over is growing wild grasses and is outlined by the undulating shadows created by the cracks and crevices of the rugged terrain. If it were not for Aguilar's dark hair dripping into the water, her body would not be easily distinguished from the rest of the landscape. Her employment of black and white photography allows for a seamless blending of dimpled skin and stone. This image of her pressing her skin over the edge of a creek, includes trees that sparsely decorate the environment and the far away horizon. Through her reflection on the surface of the creek, Aguilar not only morphs herself with the cliffs but also with the water. In this photograph there are two women, one in the dark depths of the water and the other on the bright stone. The image allows us to explore and understand the relationship Aguilar had with herself and the solace she found in the landscape. In her video essays *Laura Aguilar: Life, the Body, Her Perspective*, she describes her art practice in nature as follows:

> For a long time, I have been aware that a lot of the work, mine being out here, is about failing to be touched, and I just refer to it at as the sunlight, the warmth of the sun that it gives me, but I am at the point where I need to truly acknowledge that it's a lot about the lack of touch and tenderness I have in my life […] in these images, I see the tenderness those moments of contentment and those moment of stillness, and just I can feel the sun.[17]

[17] Stone, *Laura Aguilar Life. The Body, Her Perspective,* Film.

In an attempt to explore her dissatisfaction with her fat body and struggles with mental health, Aguilar began a complicated process of care through photography. Like fat studies scholar Caleb Luna describes, "…she and her body were operating within a fatphobic culture that denied her-and continues to deny many fat people- affirmation, love, acceptance, care or pleasure. Aguilar's photography was her method for offering these practices to herself."[18] Throughout her nude self-portraits in nature Aguilar was establishing a practice of care towards her non-normative body-mind.

When I discuss care, I refer to the practice of supporting those that are sick and disabled by providing relief and enhancing quality of life without the motivation to fix but to accommodate. It is about accepting and working with disability rather than trying to eradicate disability. This idea of care contradicts the ideology of cure that is often perpetuated by the medical industrial complex. Like the disability writer Eli Clare describes:

> Cure saves lives and ends lives, propels eradication and promises us that our body-minds can change. It is a tool in the drive to normalize humans, to shrink the diversity of shape, form, size, and function among us. Through cure, we believe we can control our fragile, changeable, adaptable selves.[19]

In its multifaceted objective cure, can provide individuals and the collective with vaccines, healthy sex guidelines, and control chronic pain. Despite these positive outcomes, the idea of eradication surrounding cure violently impacts disabled people. Through the medicalization of disability and Western ideas of normal and abnormal

[18] Luna, "The Natural History of the World," 2019.
[19] Clare, Brilliant Imperfections, 70.

many body-minds are seen as problematic. Driven by profit and cultural pressures, the medical industrial complex and its promise of cure depends on and creates body-mind trouble in all of its different forms.[20] As a fat, poor, Chicana with auditory processing disorder and diabetes Aguilar consistently faced discrimination because of her body-mind.

In her video essays, Aguilar discusses the pressures to change, diet, and cure her fat body by medical doctors and the cultural standards of beauty surrounding women's bodies. During her conversation about the nude self-portraits Aguilar makes it known to viewers that she is aware of her fat body and how she isn't considered beautiful.[21] These ideas about weight, health, and beauty stem from misogynist cultural definitions of "obesity" that have been dictated by government and public health communities who have vested interests in the medical industrial complex and pharmaceutical companies. [22] In his book *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic*, J. Eric Oliver points out that there is no concise scientific rationale in our calculations of overweight and obese bodies and that much of the American population falls out of the "ideal" weight standards imposed by medicinal professionals especially females, the poor, or minorities.[23] By falling prey to these standards Oliver states that, "…we fall under the power of the medical and science professions that tell us how we should think about bodies and how we should behave. Our current standards of overweight and obese

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[20] Ibid, 75.
[21] Stone, *Laura Aguilar Life. The Body, Her Perspective,* 2008.
[22] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 34.
[23] Ibid.

are affecting the very conceptions of who we are."[24] Given Oliver's information about weight and self-image, it becomes evident that Aguilar was working through layers of self-hate and trauma caused by our fatphobic society. Another scholar that discusses cultural rejection of abnormal body-minds is Susan J. Wendell, who writes that devalued bodies:

> …are constant reminders to the temporarily 'normal' of the rejected body – of what the 'normal' are trying to avoid, forget, and ignore […] it is not just from fear of being or becoming abnormal that the rejected body is shunned. It is also shunned from fear of pain, illness, limitation, suffering, and dying. Yet the cultural banishment of the rejected body contributes to the fear of those experiences by fostering ignorance of them.[25]

Despite mainstream attitudes of disdain towards bodies like Aguilar's, she infuses her nude self-portraits with themes of self-care, exploration, and compassion. In spite of her mixed feelings about being fat, Aguilar established this photographic practice as a form of care for her body-mind because she found contentment with herself that she stated she didn't feel often. Due to the neglect she experienced from the medical industrial complex and societal mistreatment of fat people Aguilar found herself isolated. The medical advice to diet leaving her feeling hungry and at odds with her body did not establish a healing practice of self-care. Instead, Aguilar like many disabled people or communities had to create her own self-care practice that rejected the eradication of "devalued" body-minds.

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[24] Ibid,

[25] Susan J. Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflection on Disability*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 91.

The self-acceptance she found photographing herself in the Southwestern deserts is apparent in her image *Nature Self-Portrait #4* (fig.3) where Aguilar looks at her reflection on the collection of water in the hollow rocky surface with tenderness. Here she reaches out to join hands with herself. The darker tone of Aguilar's reflection over the water represents the deeper aspects of herself and her struggles with mental health, self-love, and survival. In this image she does not attempt to blend with the surrounding environment but instead showcases her body as she looks for herself in the desert. Another image in which Aguilar does not morph herself into a rocky outcrop or follows the shadows of eroded surfaces is her photograph *Nature Self-Portrait #11* (fig.4). Here she sits alone cross-legged enjoying the rays of the sun stroke her naked body as she closes her eyes in visible pleasure. In both of these images, Aguilar is not hiding herself from the viewer nor is she engaging the viewer because these images were made for herself. They reflect the quiet and hopeful moments Aguilar connected with her body-mind and the desert. The ontological relationship Aguilar forms with the landscape is rooted in care and interconnection. In her video essays, she describes how the inspiration behind her nude nature self-portraits came to her as she was taking a hot bath and thought of her fat body as a vast landscape.[26] This conception of her body as part of the desert describes a relationship with the landscape that does not reduce itself to a nonhuman-human binary. Instead, Aguilar describes her body-mind as an extension of the Southwest desert environments.

[26] Stone, *Laura Aguilar Life. The Body, Her Perspective,* Film.

Like many other Chicanx artists, poets, and activists, the Southwest forms part of Aguilar's Mexican American identity. For Aguilar, the Southwest does not evoke a dry and barren land; instead, it is a reminder of home. Unlike Aguilar's relationship with the desert, the American environmental imagination does not regard deserts as nurturing but as an unpredictable and threatening landscapes. For these reasons, Euromerican settler colonialists coming from the east in the hopes of escaping overpopulated cities and acquiring land began efforts to dominate the desert to achieve a more favorable and idealized environment that resembled their eastern homelands. One of settler colonialism's major endeavors in "taming" the Southwest was the start of productive yeoman agriculturalism in the early 1900s.[27] According to environmental scholar Traci Brynne Voyles the relationship between settlers and the land "…were linked in a kind of patriarchal matrimony, she in "perpetual bondage" and limited to a "fecund" reproductive capacity, he in a productive role of using her resources to remake the world."[28] This Anglo relationship with the land differs greatly from the pre-existing Native American and mestizo practices towards the Southwest environment. Unlike Western ideals of dominance and control over land, Native Americans are known for their spiritual connection and harmonious way of life with nature.[29] Similarly, Mexican people who had inhabited the Southwest for generations also viewed the landscape as home. This is

[27] Traci Brynne Voyles, "The Invalid Sea: Disability Studies and Environmental Justice History," in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Towards an Eco-Crip Theory* edited by Sara Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2017.), 459
[28] Ibid.
[29] Michelle Espinoza, "Three Views of Nature in the Southwest," *Voces: A Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies* 1, no. 1, (1997): 74.

evident in the writings of Chicana cultural theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa who states that the Southwest "…was Mexican once, was Indian always, and is. And will be again."[30] Throughout U.S. history, the nation-building project of manifest destiny and the heteropatriarchal propriety relationship Western settlers perpetuated onto the land alienated Native American tribes and mestizos from their connection to the desert. As noted by Brynne Voyles:

> Native people have long been excluded from this proprietary relationship to the land, largely under the justification that theirs was a "natural" rather than a "civil" right to land ownership […] This sentiment built on already long-standing tradition in European colonial discourse that rationalized colonial domination of land and its resources on the grounds of "proper" economic land and resource use. [31]

The proprietary relationship Brynne Voyles describes, resulted in colonial extractive practices that were justified through the racial and spacial politics that render certain non-human and human bodies pollutable.[32] In the Euromerican environmental imagination, deserts are viewed as non-white landscapes and are common victims to wastelanding, a term that describes "… the assumption that non-white landscapes are valueless, or valuable only for what can be mined from beneath them, and the subsequent devastation of those very environs by polluting industries."[33]

This disabling of desert non-human and human bodies by settler colonialists and the resulting "invalidism" colonialism produced onto the environment is a legacy that

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[30] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.
[31] Tracy Bryne Voyles*, Wastelanding; The Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press)*,* 31.
[32] Ibid, 10.
[33] Ibid.

Aguilar's practice of care encompasses. In *Nature Self-Portrait #4* and *Nature Self-Portrait #9*, Aguilar does not attempt to dominate the surrounding environment. Quite the contrary, she displays a sense of vulnerability by depicting herself nude around such rugged terrain. By doing this, she does not create a barrier between herself and the desert through protective clothing. Instead, there is a mutual embrace between Aguilar and the landscape and a similar craving for care as opposed to the eradicative practices of cure. Through these images Aguilar is demonstrating decolonial practices of care towards non-normative body-minds by taking on the responsibility of decentralizing the human subject and adjusting her body-mind to serve boulders, creeks, shadows, branches and other environmental bodies that appear throughout her photographs. By recognizing that the desert landscapes in her photographs are considered non-white and disabled environments due to settler colonialism ideals and practices, one becomes aware that Aguilar shares a mutual identity with the Southwest. Not only is she attempting to redefine herself outside Western colonial paradigms of normal and natural, but she is also grappling with a mutual sense of lost ancestral heritage, knowledge, and connection. In her nude self-portraits set in nature, Aguilar does not modify the environment to fit her image of idealized depictions of nature but instead she emphasizes the continuity of her body to the desert bodies. This is true in her photograph titled *Nature Self-Portrait #2* (fig.2), where Aguilar stands on a large fallen tree with bare branches and thinner fingerlike tree stems that extend towards the sky. The image depicts Aguilar's naked backside, her arms and fingers stretching upwards like the branches and limbs of the tree she stands on, and her body fully embraces the sparse rocky grassland she faces. The

eastern sun cast shadows onto her body and helps blend the non-human and human bodies. Through her decision to mimic the fallen tree Aguilar lends the branches and stems an anthropomorphic quality that seems playful. However, this mimicry is also haunting, emphasized by the decaying state of the dead tree beneath Aguilar's feet and the twisting and turning of its limbs. According to Brynne Voyles, "…the indigenous body in pain is the ultimate symbol of colonial progress and modernity, indigenous land laid waste is its territorial corollary."[34] The darker aspects of Aguilar's work recall this body in pain Brynne Voyles describes by depicting the bare and decaying landscape of the desert due to the forced assimilation and modification of the Southwest by settler colonialism.

The pain perpetuated onto the desert by colonialism is expressed in *Nature Self-Portrait #2* by the evocative limbs on the dead tree and the dark tone of the image. Despite Aguilar's open display in her photograph, there is also a certain ambivalence about her countenance due to the position in which she stands that shields her face and body. The darker shadows that fall on her upper body also work in helping her disappear into the image. Aguilar's decision to mimic the landscape adds to the emotions of her nude portraits set in nature. Aguilar used these images to explore the emotions she felt surrounding the neglect, fatphobia, ableism, and racism she experienced. The vulnerability of these social experiences and the pain of the colonial landscape are affectively transmitted to viewers in her nude portraits set in nature. By describing

[34] Ibid, 9.

Aguilar's work as capable of transmitting affect, I mean that as viewers, we can feel with her evocative photographs, and these feelings are inspired by her work and not our individual feelings. As affect theorist Teresa Brennan describes, "…feelings are sensory states produced by thought, while interruptive thoughts are produced by affect."[35] This means that affects are not self-contained emotions but indistinct energies between individuals and the environment. Brennan describes how an image is capable of transmitting affective by stating:

> The image is also, necessarily, *transmitted.* It is transmitted as surely as the words whose sound waves or valence register physical effects in the air around the ears of those who hear […] words and images are matters of vibration, vibrations at different frequencies, but vibrations […] the immediate point is simply that sights and sounds are physical matters in themselves, carriers of social matters, social in origin but physical in their effects. Every word, every sound, has its valence; so, at a more subtle level, may every image. [36]

The impact affective photography has on a viewer is powerful and valuable in its usage for social change. This is true in Aguilar nature self-portraits where there is no overt activist message found but the feelings that seep into our physiology through factors unknown to the viewer. One senses the depth of each image and the pleasure and pain that lives in the non-human and human body-minds in Aguilar's work. A person's experiences with her work have a more intimate impact than a didactic message meant to inspire activist work in individuals. Instead, affect informed by the decolonial practice of care and vulnerability established by Aguilar stirs the viewer. By taking in her non-normative body-mind and the bare arid desert and finding beauty and spirituality in the

[35] Brennan, *Transmission of affec*t, 116.
[36] Ibid, 71.

images, one's feelings or views start to shift towards care and acceptance for what Aguilar represents. The visuality of Aguilar's intended or non-intended message of radical self-care and acceptance adds an intimate quality to the experience of being influenced by her work.

Aside from the care practice Aguilar established the other decolonial technique she employs to create an affective photograph is mimicry. One prime example of Aguilar mimicking the colonial landscape to create a connection with the desert bodies is her picture titled *Grounded #111* (fig.5). At the center of the image is Aguilar seated on the dry gravelly sand of the desert, facing a large boulder with a similar texture to the sand on which she sits. Her frontal body is facing towards the massive boulder as she crouches her fat body to hide her arms and head. Only an inkling of Aguilar's dark mop of hair separates the foreground, where her body is positioned from the boulder situated in the background. The largeness of her body creates organic folds at the edges of her figure, and the decision to render the image in color lends Aguilar a similar tone to the rest of the landscape. Her posture and largeness create a rippling of her fat that mirrors the eroded edges of the massive boulder. Besides being a photograph demonstrating the attractive aesthetics non-normative body-minds can create *Grounded #111* also serves as an example that portrays the theme of mimicry found throughout Aguilar nature practice.

For my analysis of Aguilar's nude nature self-portraits, I discuss mimicry because it plays an integral part in portraying her decolonial framework. Although mimicry came out of colonial authority's desire for an "improved" and identifiable Other, the slippages

and difference that mimicry produces also displaces colonialisms authority. Like postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha describes:

> Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensified surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers.[37]

As Aguilar demonstrates in her nature self-portraits, mimicry is a powerful tool in invoking the assimilation of non-normative body-minds into colonial landscapes. By mimicking a landscape that was violently modified to fit into colonial ideals of nature and productivity Aguilar draws a connection between the historical marginalization and violence perpetuated onto her Chicana, queer, disabled body-mind and that of the desert. Both the desert and Aguilar were assimilated into colonial notions of empire and nation by generations of settlers. However, as Aguilar demonstrates through her mimicry, she and the desert are almost the same but not entirely, or how Bhabha likes to describe mimicry as, "*Almost the same but not white*…".[38] Therefore, the decolonial paradigm of mimicry conveyed in Aguilar's images demonstrates the slippages in trying to pass as normative and productive. Still her, body-mind will always be there, revealing the very tools of colonialism efforts to assimilate non-normative body-minds.

As can be seen, Aguilar's nude self-portraits set in the Southwest landscapes allow us to analyze intimate forms of visual activism that are rooted in care and affect.

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[37] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry of Men," 123.
[38] Ibid, 128.

Aguilar photographs produced in the deserts are a form of care that rejected the harmful messages and practice of cure. The concept of care derived from disability studies also extends itself to the landscapes portrayed in Aguilar's work. Due to settler colonialisms forced assimilation of the desert environments in the Southwest into Western ideals of productive and "tamed" examples of nature, the desert was subject to unjust disablement or wastelanding. Therefore, not only was Aguilar practicing care for herself but also towards the "invalid" deserts. The intimate work Aguilar set out to document in her nature photographs created a human and non-human interrelationship that undermines the legacies of colonialism.

Chapter 2: *Three Eagles Flying* and Exclusionary Nationalism

In 1990, Aguilar created her most recognizable work entitled *Three Eagles Flying*, a triptych depicting her in the nude standing between the US flag hanging at the left of her and the Mexican flag on her right. Aguilar's head is wrapped in another Mexican flag, and her lower body is covered by a second US flag that wraps around her like a skirt. Her arms, breasts, and torso remain uncovered while a thick rope twists around Aguilar's neck, falls between her chest, curves around her midsection and thighs, and shackles her hands in front of her stomach. Often *Three Eagles Flying* is described as representing Aguilar's Chicanx identity because of her positionality between Mexican and American symbols. Although this is one of the points *Three Eagles Flying* is exploring, it is not the only part of Aguilar's identity that it considers. Much of Aguilar's work is based on her intersectional identity as an American with Mexican native Californio and Irish descent and as a lesbian, poor, disabled woman diagnosed with auditory processing disorder, diabetes, and severe depression. Due to the many identities, she embodied, we cannot discuss *Three Eagles Flying* without considering Aguilar's intersectionality and how the multiplicity of her experiences influenced one another.

In my analysis of *Three Eagles Flying,* I examine how Aguilar situates her body between overtly nationalist symbols to evoke issues surrounding the body politics of belonging to the nation-state. When I refer to body politics, I mean the practices and policies utilized by powers regulating society to control the human body and the degree of

autonomy and social control individuals have over their bodies. I focus on these points to examine how Aguilar's fat, queer, disabled, Chicanx body-mind does not fall into the nationalist imagination of desired political bodies. My analysis will draw from scholars like Julie Avril Minich, Alison Kafer, J. Eric Oliver, Gloria A. Anzaldúa, and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio to discuss how *Three Eagles Flying* resists the silencing of "undesired" body-minds by exclusionary nationalism.

A major theme in this image, is Aguilar grappling with her Chicana identity and displaying the complexities of embodying two conflicting cultures. Growing up during the 1960s and 70s, Aguilar's household rejected the radical politics of the Chicano movement and did not embrace their Mexican American heritage.[39] It was not until she started attending East Los Angeles College (ELAC) in the 1980s that Aguilar developed a strong connection to her Mexican ancestry through the Chicano studies courses offered at the school.[40] In *Three Eagles Flying* Aguilar is claiming a Chicana identity by standing at the center of the triptych confined and bound up by two different cultures that are represented by the US and Mexican flags. The overtly political representation of identity falls into the topics Chicanx artist explore. As Chicana scholar Anzaldúa describes:

> Chicana/o art is a form of border art, an art shared with our Mexican counterparts from across the border, with Native Americans, and with other-groups of color and non-color folks living in the vicinity of the Mexico-US border or near other cultural border elsewhere in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Both Chicana/o and border art challenge and subvert U.S. imperialism and combat assimilation by either the U.S. or Mexico, yet they acknowledge its affinities to both.[41]

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[39] "Transcript of Episode 6: Fly Like an Eagle," *Art History for All*, July 30, 2018. Podcast Transcript. https://arthistoryforall.com/transcript-of-episode-6-fly-like-an-eagle.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 59.

In *Three Eagles Flying*, Aguilar depicts a haunting visualization of her fraught political identity as a queer, disabled, and poor woman caught between her Mexican and American identity. In her photograph the US and Mexican national symbols do not embrace her in a nurturing way but threaten Aguilar. This is because the body-mind Aguilar represents does not belong in the national imagination of the US and Mexico despite her legal citizenship and ancestry. Even as Chicanx studies and activism have regarded citizenship as a political goal to gain an advantageous position in society they acknowledge that there needs to be a reassessment of citizenship because there continues to be injustices in society that citizens experience due to their subjugated identities.[42] In her photograph *Three Eagles Flying,* injustice is represented as the taking of one's life, freedom, and identity through her usage of rope and flags. Drawing from her Mexican heritage and experience being born and raised as an American citizen she shows the violence and death that is perpetuated onto "undesired" body-minds. In Minich's exploration of political belonging through bodily metaphors she states:

> The image of the nation as a whole, nondisabled body whose health must be protected from external pollutants justifies the political marginalization not only of immigrants but also of citizens, including those with disabilities and diseases (whose bodies challenge the image of the healthy national body) and racialized and sexual minorities (whose claims to social and political rights are seen to imperil national unity.) In other words, the representation of the nation as a whole, healthy body that must be safeguarded against pathogens or parasites has helped to create what historian Mae Ngai calls *alien citizens*: persons who are "citizens by virtue of their birth…but who are presumed to be foreign."[43]

[42] Minich, *Accessible* Citizenships,13.
[43] Ibid, 3.

By applying this understanding of "alien citizens" that Minich describes onto Aguilar's non-normative identification as a queer, fat, brown body-mind, *Three Eagles Flying* represents this political marginalization of the vulnerable regardless of citizenship. It demonstrates how many Mexican or Latinx people who were born in the US or immigrated are regarded as foreigners despite their legal status or citizenship. The violence and flag imagery Aguilar employs also alludes to the great lengths many Mexican Americans or immigrants will go to be identified as American. For example, the usage of flags to cover a body is used when military personnel have passed away and their caskets are dressed in American flags.[44] The connection to the US military may represent the historical recruitment of Mexican people to join the military in the hopes of becoming naturalized citizens. Aguilar's visibly subjugated body demonstrates the years of servitude many immigrants and people occupying a lower socio-economic position will be put through for political benefits. It also represents the unjust violence and trauma perpetuated onto immigrants and "alien citizens" by the nation.

Interestingly, flags are not the only patriotic symbolism Aguilar employs but also that of the female figure. In *Three Eagles Flying* her breasts are on display, therefore, feminizing the anonymous Mexican American figure she portrays. The usage of women's bodies in patriotic allegories is a visual tradition used by Mexican and US nations, quite famously, la Virgen de Guadalupe and the Statue of Liberty.[45] In this photograph, Aguilar functions as a U.S.- Mexico borderlands lady liberty but instead her body demonstrates the

[44] "Transcript of Episode 6: Fly Like an Eagle."
[45] "Transcript of Episode 6: Fly Like an Eagle."

humiliation, subjugation, trauma, and even death Mexican immigrants or "alien citizens" endure. She is not an idealized representation of national myths but an "undesired" queer, fat, disabled, and poor Chicana.

When considering the representation of minorities in *Three Eagles Flying*, it is valuable to examine the role disability plays in representing subaltern people in American society. Like Chicanx studies, disability studies allow us to imagine what an accessible form of political belonging might be like and offers a framework to re-think nationalism and citizenship.[46] This is because citizenship is predicated on productive and ableist cultural beliefs that discriminate against people who may be a "burden" to the nation-state. By exploring Aguilar's identity as a fat and disabled Chicana in *Three Eagles Flying*, we can think about deeply embedded cultural ideologies that inform contested citizenship through a different framework. It can also allow for decolonial imaginings of political belonging and citizenship. I draw on disability scholar Alison Kafer's definition of disability from her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* as not a fixed identity nor category that is inherent in certain body-minds but as she calls:

> Collective affinities in terms of disability could encompass everyone from people with learning disabilities to those with chronic illness, from people with mobility impairments to those with HIV/AIDS, from people with sensory impairments to those with mental illness. People within each of these categories can all be discussed in terms of disability politics, not because of any essential similarities among them but because all have been labeled as disabled or sick and have faced discrimination as a result.[47]

[46] Minich, *Accessible* Citizenships, 4.
[47] Alison Kafer*, Feminist, Queer, Crip,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 11.

This political/relational framing of disability is model that allows room for an activist response to discrimination and directly refuses the depoliticization of disability. The framework contrasts from the medical/individual model of disability that characterizes "…atypical bodies and minds as deviant, pathological, and defective, best understood and addressed in medical terms."[48] Cultural beliefs surrounding ideas about natural and normal body-minds inform the flawed concept of citizenship. Although Aguilar has non-visible disabilities and viewers of *Three Eagles Flying* may not be aware of her experiences with diabetes, auditory processing disorder, and chronic depression, her fat body is a symbol of non-normative and "unhealthy" bodily representation. Fat people are often critiqued for mismanaging their life and health because fat bodies are culturally viewed as weak-willed, lazy and should be "cured" through medical/individual interventions. The anxiety surrounding fat people is tied to ideals informed by the body politics of citizenship. According to J. Eric Oliver:

> Like many types of prejudice, the aversion to fatness is rooted in anxiety, specifically with regard to one's economic status and social position. White, middle-class Americans particularly loathe fatness because it seems to violate the American creed of temperance and self-reliance, thus fatness marks those who lack the requisite moral standing to be in society's upper echelons. [49]

Often, those that are identified as fat are black and brown poor people who have "failed" at taking responsibility of their own welfare. On average, one in three African Americans and one in four Latinos are classified as obese compared to one in five non-Latino whites.[50]

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[48] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 5.
[49] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics,* 62.
[50] Ibid, 75.

Given that obesity is so prevalent among minorities and poor people, the condemnation of fatness serves as a tool to highlight another "moral failure" of "undesired" body-minds and a justification for their continual marginalization.[51]Another issue many poor and fat people face is discrimination for their reliance on welfare programs because they are not seen as deserving of government spending because they betray the American ideal that a citizen should be self-reliant and individualistic.[52] By considering the discrimination many fat people face, thinking about fatness through a disabilities framework helps us understand how certain citizens are seen as burdens and not as productive and deserving of the benefits the nation-state has for privileged body-minds. Aguilar's placement of her fat naked body in *Three Eagles Flying* reaffirms the defectiveness and disgust perpetuated onto fat bodies and the medical-industrial complex's desire to eradicate fatness, conscripting citizens in helping to eliminate it by defining it as an American epidemic.

Another indication of disability in Aguilar's *Three Eagles Flying* is the symbolic rendering of the tortured and harmed body that stands between the US and Mexican flags. Her display of subjugation recalls the treatment and experiences immigrants, and minorities face due to unjust policies, social structures and cultural attitudes that leave them more vulnerable to disability. By occupying a lower socio-economic status, children who grow up poor are more likely to be developmentally delayed and be diagnosed with an emotional or behavioral disorder than those who grow up more privileged.[53] The toxic

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid, 73.
[53] Ashlee Loughan and Robert Perna, "Neurocognitive impacts for children of poverty and neglect," American Psychological Association, July 2012.

forces like white supremacy enforces exclusion and justifies the exploitation of subaltern people. Aguilar's overtly political and resistive photograph portrays the abuse immigrants and "alien citizens" encounter in their chase for the mythical American dream. Although *Three Eagles Flying* was taken in 1990, it has become even more relevant in our current climate. Issues surrounding immigration at the southern border are at the forefront of political discourse and policies. The exclusion of South American migrants has resulted in increased surveillance and policing as well as unethical migrant camps that house many unaccompanied children. In the name of Empire, the body-minds of immigrants are exploited and their subsequent neglect from the nation-state is justified due to their "undesired" presence. Contemporary author Karla Cornejo Villavicencio has followed the disabling effects of exclusionary nationalism on immigrants in her book *The Undocumented Americans*. While visiting Flint, Michigan Cornejo Villavicencio interviewed undocumented residents and she describes her time there as follows:

> What I saw in Flint was a microcosm of the way the government treats the undocumented everywhere, making the conditions in this country as deadly and toxic and inhumane as possible so that we will self-deport. What I saw in Flint was what I had seen everywhere else, what I had felt in my own poisoned blood and bones. Being killed softly, silently, and with impunity.[54]

Along with her experience at Flint, Cornejo Villavicencio also details the toxic effects of white supremacy through her interviews with Latinx undocumented day laborers and the 9/11 second responders who cleaned up the chemical waste at Ground Zero. As a result of their work, she discovered that many undocumented immigrants have absorbed a

[54] Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, *The Undocumented Americans*, (New York: One World, 2019), 115.

tremendous amount of emotional and physical stress and have become sick with cancer, arthritis, paranoia, and PTSD, to name a few illnesses. This unjust disablement of Latinx people is reflected in Aguilar's *Three Eagles* because brown body-minds are not welcomed nor accommodated for but instead exploited for the nation's benefit. The visuality of pain and abuse by nationalist symbols that Aguilar portrays in *Three Eagles Flying* continues to represent the generational and contemporary subjugation of Latinx people.

Thus, Aguilar's evocative image of political belonging displays the exclusion of "undesired" body-minds. Through a Chicanx and disability studies framework, *Three Eagles Flying* demonstrates the fraught and conflicting identities Aguilar embodied and the ideologies surrounding exclusionary nationalism. Her covered face lends her anonymity, allowing her experiences to be identified within more significant social and political issues. In Aguilar's radical vulnerability, we find a resistive language that uncovers the toxicity of the nation.

Chapter 3: Inaccessible Structures

Throughout my analysis of Aguilar's photographs, I have discussed the overtones of Chicanx, fat, and disability activism she established in her artwork and practice. In my consideration of Aguilar's advocacy for accessibility and inclusion, I also examine her early photographs *Access + Opportunity= Success* and *Will Work For #4* to discuss her didactic approaches in advocating for herself and other marginalized people. In her piece, *Access + Opportunity = Success,* created in 1993, she displays a series of five images that comprise a pentaptych. A cardboard sign with one portion of the phrase "Access + Opportunity = Success" is displayed on cardboard sign and those with the word and definition include Aguilar holding it up in the picture frame. Her other image *Will Work For #4,* created in the same year as *Access + Opportunity = Success*, also portrays Aguilar holding up a cardboard sign but this time it reads "Artist Will Work For Axcess." In this photograph she holds up her sign in front of a wall that is labeled "Gallery" and she stares directly into the camera provoking viewers to contemplate her message. I consider these two artworks by Aguilar because they reflect her experiences in navigating the elitist and inaccessible academic and art institutions she came across as a student and artist.

To expand on my analysis of Aguilar's critique towards inequality, discrimination, and inaccessibility, I draw from scholars Eli Clare and Jay Timothy Dolmage, who discuss the structural biases towards folk with non-normative body-minds

and the negative impacts they have on divergent body-minds. As a poor Chicana facing severe mental health issues, auditory processing disorder, and diabetes, and her untimely death due to end-stage renal failure in 2018, Aguilar understood what it was like to be viewed as value-less and ignored due to her disabilities and identity as a brown, poor woman. By examining *Access + Opportunity = Success* and *Will Work For #4* I hope to address her experiences and critique of ableist and discriminatory social and cultural structures that excluded Aguilar.

Growing up, Aguilar was impacted by the difficulties she faced because of her auditory processing disorder. This form of disorder makes it difficult for an individual's brain to process sound and impacts a child's ability to follow conversations, read, write, and spell. In her personal video essays *Laura Aguilar: Life, the Body, Her Perspective* retells her experience as a child with auditory processing disorder stating:

> People didn't understand me, so I kept within myself. Teachers didn't understand me, so I just didn't exist to anybody…you pick up that you don't belong […] When you leave your house, and you go to school, and you know teachers want other kids in your neighborhood to be in your class with you because you don't speak very good, so they go "Tommy what's Laurie saying Becky what's Laurie saying" and by the third-grade teachers stop talking to me and just ask Becky or Tommy or Kathy or Jamie what's Laura saying you know, and you disappear, and kids make fun of you because you sound funny and you just don't talk because you're tired of people laughing at you …you're tired of when you get home your parents say "oh it's so cute how Laura can't talk right." […] My family and my experience growing up in school everybody is treating me like I was retarded they never said that word but "Laura is slow" remedial classes, special ed classes I graduated from high school, and I couldn't read, but I didn't cause trouble, so I passed.[55]

[55] Stone, *Laura Aguilar Life. The Body, Her Perspective*, Film.

Judging from Aguilar's account of her school experience, she did not receive adequate accommodations and was ignored by educators. The isolation and helplessness she felt is due to the unworthiness placed on individuals viewed as intellectually disabled. People who are not neurotypical and cope with the visceral experience of non-normative communication and brain processing are vulnerable to abuse and discrimination because of the deeply rooted belief that personhood is determined through intelligence.[56]

In her photographs, *Access + Opportunity= Success* Aguilar portrays the necessary factors in achieving success to viewers in plain language. She confronts societal inequalities and the celebration of success by privileged people who are afforded access and opportunity to achieve their full potential. Aguilar knows firsthand that underprivileged minorities are not provided with the same education and care that their white, middle-class, able-bodied counterparts. In her message of inequal distribution of access and opportunity she uses definitions and mathematical symbols that can be plainly understood and are more inclusive to the audience. Scholar Jay Timothy Dolmage emphasizes the necessity to incorporate plain language in the work of disability studies and activism because it allows for a broader variety of people with disabilities to engage in conversations about themselves.[57] Aguilar's draws upon her experiences as an excluded and ignored individual to interrupt a viewer's conception of success in privileged spaces like an art museum or gallery. The elitism of the art sphere was

[56] Eli Clare, Brilliant Imperfections, 157.
[57] Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017) 33.

something Aguilar did not identify with nor felt comfortable around. In her personal letters and essays, Aguilar grapples with intense shyness and fear about displaying her work.[58] After a wealthy white woman disrespectfully ignored her at the opening of her group show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, in the early 1990s, Aguilar writings express feelings of intense anxiety and fragility.[59] Despite these prejudices she continued to create courageous representations of her experiences as a minority and activist.

Aguilar's confrontation with the art world's exclusion of her work is also portrayed in her photograph *Will Work For #4*. In this image, Aguilar stands outside a gallery acting like an urban beggar with a handwritten cardboard sign that reads "Artist Will Work For Axcess." By the art establishment's standards Aguilar was an outlier not of the right class, ethnicity, gender, and size. Her neurodivergence also added to her exclusion and she portrays the discrimination she faced because of her disability by misspelling the word access in her sentence. Given the substandard education many disabled students receive and her late diagnosis in her 20s, Aguilar often misspelled and mispronounced words; this is seen in her writings that she would sometimes use in her work. By displaying her neurodivergence, Aguilar confronts the discrimination of non-normative body-minds and challenges our cultural beliefs around intelligence. Instead of correcting her spelling, Aguilar refuses to assimilate to the demands of our ableist

[58] Yxta Maya Murray, "Laura Aguilar Was a Proud Latina Lesbian, and She Flaunted It: What do the late artist's emotional photo-text letters reveal about the craft of self-expression?"aperature, November 12, 2019, https://aperture.org/editorial/laura-aguilar-yxta-maya-murray/.
[59] Ibid.

culture. In his writing about disability, Clare challenges us to think about intelligence as another tool for oppression stating:

> Let me remind all of us-disabled and nondisabled- that every time we defend our intelligence, we come close to disowning intellectually disabled people. We imply that it might be okay to exclude, devalue, and institutionalize people who actually live with body-mind conditions that impact the ways they think, understand, and process information […] If we resist using intelligence as a measure of worth and personhood, then it can never again be used as a weapon.[60]

Unlike many other professional artists, Aguilar did not complete a formal art education. Despite her brief time at East Los Angeles College where she was mentored by artist Suda House and art historian Sybil Venegas, Aguilar did not finish her degree. She was mostly self-taught and lacked the formal training the art world prizes. The exclusion of disabled people from higher education is not uncommon due to universities being entrenched in deeply ableist standards that are not accommodating to minorities. Statistically 13 percent of U.S. citizens that are 25 and older with a disability hold a bachelor's degree compared to the 31 percent of those without a disability.[61] According to Dolmage's research in *Academic Ableism* he finds that:

> Universities continue to function to keep certain groups of individuals out of the work force and away from status positions, and away from knowledge and dialogue and power, and not just through admissions.[62]

The lack of prestige Aguilar's self-taught art practice presented was not appealing to art institutions. Her underprivileged background furthered her alienation from art galleries and Aguilar did not profit from much from her work. Despite being undervalued by the

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[60] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfections*, 158.
[61] Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 21.
[62] Ibid.

art world, Aguila continued creating pieces that expressed her anxieties and exclusion in radically vulnerable images.

Ultimately, Aguilar's work represents her struggles navigating inaccessible social, political, and cultural structures and attitudes about fat, queer, disabled, and Latinx like herself. Her images *Access + Opportunity= Success* and *Will Work For #4* overtly resist dominant ideas about success in an unequal society. Aguilar's work demonstrates how the personal is political in a profoundly poetic and impactful way. Through these pieces, she resists self-shaming and instead turns her critical lens towards the structural inequality in art institutions that bar her from participating as a successful artist.

Conclusion: Disability and Aguilar

In my analysis of Aguilar's photography, I consider her images through a disability studies framework of the body-mind to discuss the impact Aguilar's nonnormative identity had on her art practice. Through my examination of Aguilar's work, I discuss the exclusion, inaccessibility, and devaluing of her personhood due to her status as a poor, lesbian, and disabled Chicana. For my thesis, I chose to focus on several images from her continual photographic series *Nature Self Portrait* and *Grounded* and three photographs titled *Three Eagles Flying*, *Access + Opportunity = Success*, and *Will Work For #4* because they deal with Aguilar's "devalued" body-mind and her efforts to challenge the inequalities and disregard minorities face. I also chose to analyze these photographs because they portray Aguilar's visual activism in different forms and build on her multilayered experience.

When considering her photos from *Nature Self Portrait* and *Grounded* series, I argue that Aguilar's photographic practice in nature functions as a form of care that resists the ideology of cure. Through the formal aspects of her work and personal video essays, she discusses the self-acceptance and healing she finds in the Southwestern desert landscapes. Aguilar's search for joy in her nude portraits in nature results from the deprivation of pleasure due to the trauma and damaging effects mainstream and the medical-industrial complex has had on Aguilar's body-mind. Along with my analysis of the impact Aguilar's disability and ethnic identity had in her images from *Nature Self*

Portrait and *Grounded* I also consider the disabling of the desert landscapes in her photos. Due to the modification and exploitation of deserts by settler colonialism many desert ecologies of the Southwest have been rendered "wastelands." The ontological relationship Aguilar established with the desert ecologies through the placement of her body and consideration of the natural bodies of the landscape represent the care she offered the desert. This form of care towards the landscapes resists the exploitative practices of colonialism and functions as a framework for decolonial practices for taking responsibility of the "invalid" ecologies. The connections I draw between Aguilar and the desert also encompass her ancestral heritage and Chicana identity. By mimicking the colonized Southwestern deserts creates a complicated relationship of paying homage to her heritage and alluding to the assimilation of colonized subjects. Her visual work carries the affects of colonialist legacies and functions as a tool for visual activism and Chicanx embodiment.

Along with my analysis of Aguilar's nude self-portraits I examine her most well-known work *Three Eagles Flying*, to talk about the body politics informing exclusionary nationalism. Like the rest of Aguilar's work, her multilayered identity influences *Three Eagles Flying,* and I approach this photo through a Chicanx and disability studies framework to re-think ideas about political belonging and accessible citizenships. This evocative image demonstrates the exclusion of "undesired" body-minds and Aguilar's conflicting identities are put on display to discuss the exploitation and neglect of disabled and Latinx people. Through her display of neglect, death, silencing, and abuse of her fat,

female, and brown body Aguilar represents the subjugation of minorities, undocumented immigrants, and "alien citizens."

In addition to my analysis of Aguilar's activist work I look at her more didactic images titled *Access + Opportunity = Success* and *Will Work For #4* to discuss the discrimination and inaccessibility she faced as a disabled, poor Chicana navigating an elitist art world. Due to her undervalued identity, she was notoriously ignored by the gallery world and did not make a great living from her work. These images depict Aguilar's struggles with the structural inequalities that forcefully keep out people with disabilities and those that do not have a privileged background. Due to her neurodivergence and her inability to conform to normative societal standards Aguilar faced many prejudices from elitist institutions.

I decided to focus on Aguilar's work through a disability studies framework to build on conversations about Aguilar's experience with disability and how it influenced her work. The discourse surrounding Aguilar's work mainly focuses on her ethnic and queer identities and brush over her disabled experience. In my thesis I emphasize Aguilar's disabled embodiment to demonstrate the knowledge, courage, and power that disability brought to her work. Through Aguilar's poignant and powerful work, she challenges efforts to eradicate "undesired" body-minds and shows the valuable nonnormative voices.

Figures

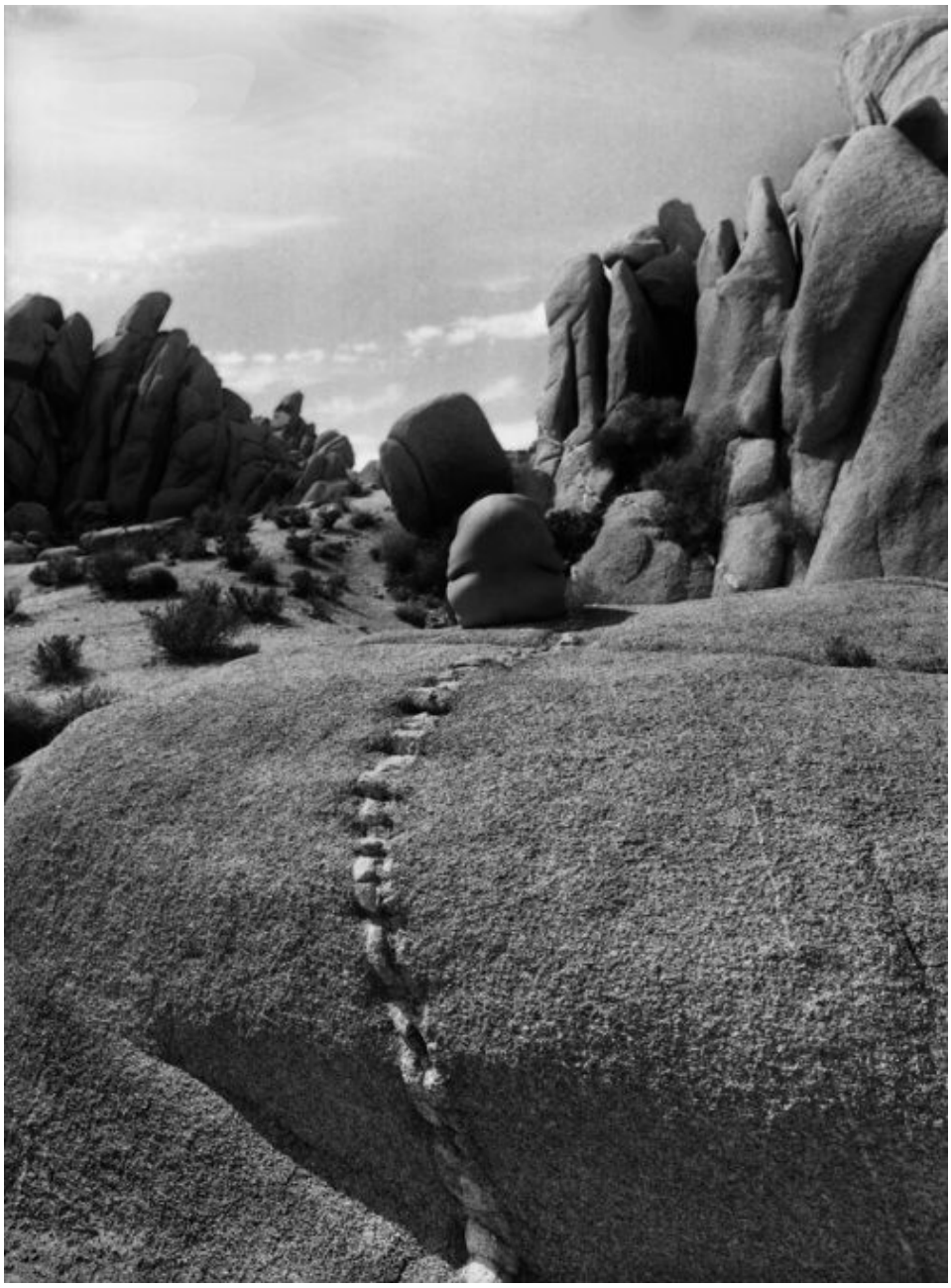

Figure 1: Laura Aguilar, *Grounded #106*, 18.5 x 12.3 in, 1992, Gelatin Silver Print, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Figure 2: Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self- Portrait #2,* 16 x 20", 1996, Gelatin Silver Print, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Figure 3: Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #14,* 16 x 20", 1996, Gelatin Silver Print, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

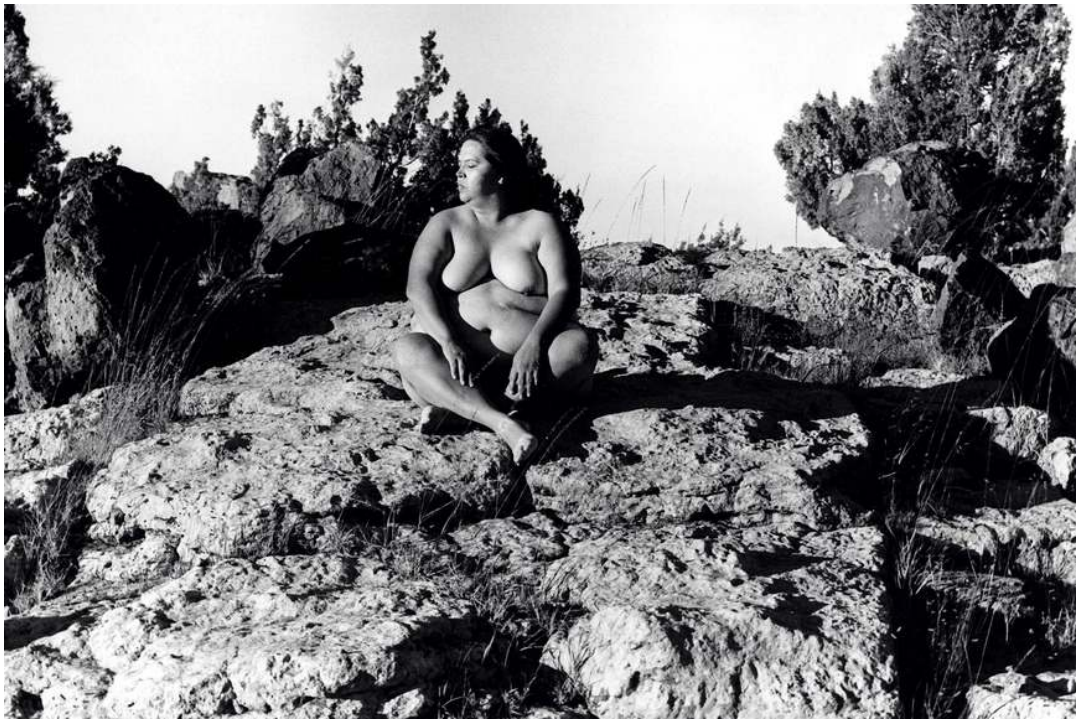

Figure 4: Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #11*, 16 x 20", 1996, Gelatin Silver Print, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

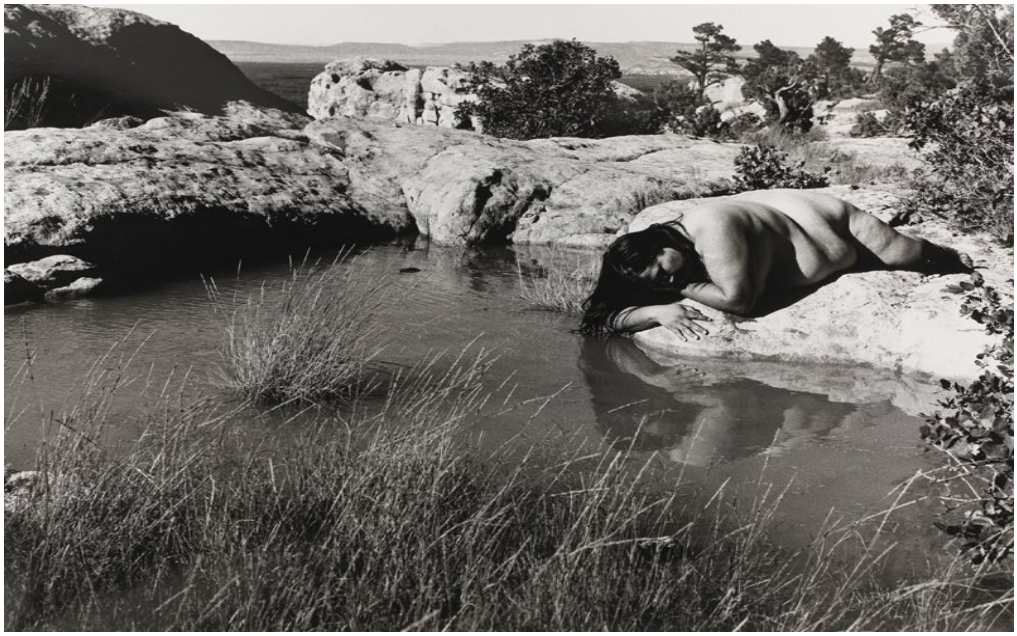

Figure 5: Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #9,* 16 x 20", 1996, Gelatin Silver Print, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Figure 6: Laura Aguilar, *Grounded #111*, 22 x 17 in, 2006, Inkjet print, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Figure 7: Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying,* 24 x 20 in, 1990, Gelatin Silver Print, Getty Museum.

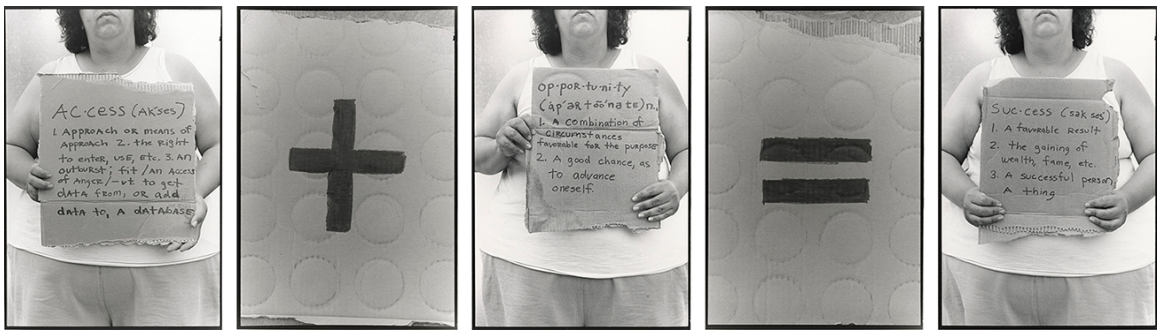

Figure 8: Laura Aguilar, *Access + Opportunity = Success*, 6 x 4 in each, 1993, Five gelatin silver prints, Getty Museum.

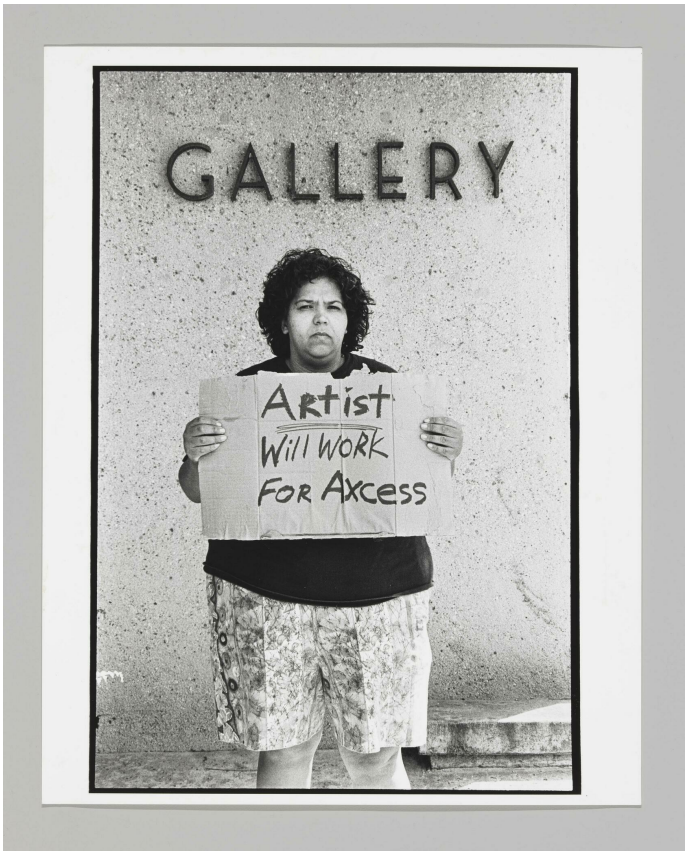

Figure 9: Laura Aguilar, *Will Work For #4*, 20 x 16", 1993, Gelatin Silver Print, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

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